

News Roundup

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The federal government's "[sequester](#)," a package of across-the-board budget cuts, starts today. Federal criminal justice agencies like the Bureau of Prisons aren't happy about it. As NPR [summarizes](#), "[c]orrections officers in the federal prison system are bracing for possible staffing cuts and furloughs . . . at a time when . . . inmate crowding and staff shortages in federal prisons are already posing challenges for guards trying to maintain order behind bars." The federal court system is likewise planning for lean times, and federal grant funding for state agencies and organizations is likely to dwindle.

In other news:

1. **Racial disparities falling.** Some racial disparities in imprisonment have been falling recently. The *New York Times* reports [here](#) that "[i]ncarceration rates for black Americans dropped sharply from 2000 to 2009, especially for women, while the rate of imprisonment for whites and Hispanics rose over the same decade." An expert cited in story suggests that a reduction in the "intensity of incarceration for drug offending" is part of the explanation. The story is based on a report by the [Sentencing Project](#).
2. **Sentencing Commission on child pornography guidelines.** Not to be confused with the Sentencing Project is the United States Sentencing Commission, which has also issued a [noteworthy new report](#), on sentencing for child pornography offenses. For a long-winded government report, it's pretty blistering about the child pornography guidelines, noting that judges usually don't follow them; that they "no longer adequately distinguish[] among offenders based on their degrees of culpability"; and that "most stakeholders in the federal criminal justice system consider the nonproduction child pornography sentencing scheme to be seriously outmoded."
3. **Supreme Court happenings.** Sticking with the federal theme, the Supreme Court's been in the news. First, it just heard *Maryland v. King*, the case about the constitutionality of collecting DNA upon arrest. Obviously, the decision has the potential to have a major impact in North Carolina; the argument transcript and lots of other information is [here](#), on SCOTUSblog. Second, I continue to find Justice Thomas the most intriguing member of the Court. In [this Atlantic piece](#), he explains why his opinions are shorter than his colleagues', and written in plainer language. In essence, he wants the law to be "accessible to regular people." Third, Justice Sotomayor used some [pretty plain language herself](#) in rebuking a federal prosecutor who said in closing argument, "You've got African-Americans, you've got Hispanics, you've got a bag full of money. Does that tell you — a light bulb doesn't go off in your head and say, This is a drug deal?"
4. **Controversy in Chapel Hill.** Closer to home, the student honor court at UNC Chapel Hill has been in the national news lately. Tendentious headlines abound, like [this blog post](#) which proclaims, "University of North Carolina student could be expelled for 'intimidating' her rapist by talking about her assault." The *News and Observer* explores the matter further [here](#). In brief, a female student "has been charged with an honor code violation [abusing or disparaging another] for speaking out about alleged abuse and sexual violence by an ex-boyfriend, who also is a UNC-CH student." The ex-boyfriend was never charged criminally, and the student honor court found him not guilty of sexual assault, which makes the matter a little less clear-cut. The female student hasn't identified the male by name in her public statements, which are part of a broader discussion about whether the administration has done everything it should to prevent sexual violence.
5. **Indispensable resource.** Finally, the 2012 supplement to *North Carolina Crimes* is now available for purchase.

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